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Deep Creek: Still special after 60 years

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McHenry—Maryland has no natural lakes, but here in Garrett county people have made do nicely with what the old Youghiogheny Hydroelectric Power Corporation created by damming Deep Creek nearly 60 years ago.

No one in 1925 seems to have envisioned Deep Creek Lake as the year-round centerpiece of a regional tourism economy. Power boats were illegal during the lake's early years.

They were "too noisy and polluting" to fit the plan for the lake as "a special place ... a habitat for trout and a haven for wild ducks," said Swepson Earle, then the state conservation commissioner.

It was just over 60 feet at its deepest and was said to be the biggest manmade lake in the country; and even though the Susquehanna River at flood could fill it in a half-day, 6 square miles of water appearing rather suddenly in these hills must have been something.

Mr. Earle imported canoes and hauled a "Hooper Island sailboat" all the way up here to give the locals the first view many had ever had of a sailcraft.

Even 30-odd years ago the lake still looked "so big, so wild" to a boy of 5 camping with his family on its shore, recalls Gary Yoder, a state Department of Natural Resources employee here.

"And now I can't believe how small and fragile and vulnerable it seems," he says.

It is only slightly simplistic to say the department hired Mr. Yoder several years ago because so many people up here hated it and so many of these same people liked Mr. Yoder. As it happened, the DNR got themselves a good deal more than popularity, and the lake got its first full-time advocate.

Advocate and more: "The lake is my mistress," he says.

His official job is to develop the first management plan for the lake, which may be pushing its limits in areas as diverse as speedboat traffic and acid rain.

The lake is quiet, except for fall colors approaching a sizzle, as we leave Mr. Yoder's waterfront apartment on an early October morning—the all-too-brief lull between summer and winter tourist seasons. The water has become gun-metal blue as the lake turns over in bed, its rapidly cooling surface waters sinking, churning and reoxygenating the bottom layers.

We're off for a tour of what Swepson Earle's mountain haven for fish and ducks has become over the last six decades. Boat is the only way to go, owing to the gangliform shape of the lake, which gives it an extraordinary 65 miles of shoreline, and to the fact that less than a mile of the 65 is in public access.

While the sun burns off the morning fog, Mr. Yoder motors across the cove for pancakes at Deep Creek Lodge, a dark, cavernous, old, timbered dining room overhung with stuffed elk heads, a place you might go so as not to be noticed.

Perhaps that made it the perfect place for the shadowy group of men who occupied the back dining table here for several days in 1953. At the end of their stay, they slipped the then-experimental drug, LSD, to a government scientist, Frank Olsen, who days later plunged to his death from a 10th-story New York hotel room.

In 1975 his family in Frederick collected $1.25 million in damages from an embarrassed government as the dark goings-on of the CIA agents at Deep Creek Lodge were acknowledged for the first time. The lodge now is back to being known mostly for its fluffy buckwheats and steak-sized sausage.

There are 5,000 boats on the lake now, Mr. Yoder says as we begin our run; and perhaps 4,800 are powerboats—about 800 per square mile if they all were out there at once, which it almost seems they are on peak summer weekends.

"Those times, I think we are pretty close to carrying capacity ... to where the quality of the recreational experience is significantly degraded," he says.

He especially dislikes the Scarabs. There are only a few of them on the lake so far, but at 29½ feet and 500 horsepower, these sleek raceboats seem almost to diminish Deep Creek Lake, and at 60 mph they throw a wake that exacerbates already troublesome shoreline erosion.

The failure to limit horsepower on the lake "is the biggest mistake they ever made here," according to Gordon Douglass. He is biased, of course. He moved here 23 years ago to begin building his Flying Scot sailboat design.

The factory near the lake has now produced more than 3,800 of the able little 19-foot craft, and they have become a major national racing class. The 150 or so Flying Scots on the lake are the nation's largest fleet.

But for my money the grandest phase of boating history on the lake is garaged at Dick and Betty Friend's marina. It is like entering an old barn and finding it full of vintage Model T Fords.

There, stored for the winter, are dozens of solid mahogany, classic speedboats built by Chris Craft until the 1960s. One of them, a 1926, is a gem of the wooden boatbuilder's craft, its graceful, tumblehomed stern following curves never attempted with today's popped-from-the-mold fiberglass.

They were the dominant craft on

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